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Viewing cable 06BOGOTA2063, LIBERAL PARTY CANDIDATE RIVERA ON PRESIDENTIAL

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BOGOTA2063	2006-03-08 14:34	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Bogota

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SUBJECT: LIBERAL PARTY CANDIDATE RIVERA ON PRESIDENTIAL CHANCES

Classified By: Political Counselor Jeffrey DeLaurentis.
Reasons: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

11. (C) Liberal party presidential candidate and Senator Rodrigo Rivera Salazar, in a March 3 breakfast with poloffs, reviewed his campaign strategy, forecast the future of his party, and discussed how he would improve Colombia's role in the region. Rivera predicted that he would win the March 12 primary for the Liberal Party (PLC) nomination and go on to defeat President Uribe in the May 28 election. Rivera characterized himself as in the mold of President Clinton, a "moderate outsider" who planned to surprise everyone with a "David and Goliath-like" type victory. He said the Liberals had not yet developed a party line on the FTA, but he personally viewed the FTA as predominately positive, with a few reservations on how it might affect displaced farmers and anti-narcotic efforts. Rivera is highly unlikely to win the PLC primary, but is a future presidential contender, particularly popular with young voters. He is likely to finish behind HoracioSerpa but should make a strong enough showing to be considered a serious Liberal option in 2010. End summary.

Climbing in the Polls

12. (C) Rivera told Poloffs March 3 that he was confident of victory in the March 12 primary despite trailing in the polls. He acknowledged that he trailed both HoracioSerpa and Rafael Pardo in some polls, but claimed there were others that had him in the lead. On March 5, a poll in "El Tiempo," Colombia's most widely-circulated newspaper, showed Rivera in second place with 9 percent, behind Serpa's 57 percent, and ahead of Pardo's 8 percent. In most previous polls, he has trailed Pardo. The poll showed 22 percent of voters were still undecided. (Note: all eligible voters are permitted to vote in the Liberal Party primary, not just PLC members.) Assistant Secretary of the PLC Boris Zapata, responsible for PLC internal polling, told Poloff on March 7 that internal party information showed Rivera doing even better. Zapata said Serpa was expected to garner 45-50 percent, Rivera 15-20 percent, Pardo 10-12 percent, and Andres Gonzalez 3-4 percent of the vote. Of the two promising candidates expected to finish behind Serpa, Zapata predicted that Rivera would be the stronger candidate for the Liberals in 2010.

Making a Name for Himself

13. (C) Rivera said his strategy to employ television as a means of securing votes nationally would lead him to victory. He claimed that Serpa and Pardo dominated exposure in leading newspapers and magazines such as "El Tiempo" and "La Semana," due to "family connections." He was convinced that 19 million television viewers, from all parts of the nation, would far outweigh the few who follow the "biased" print-media. He predicted that his strong performances in televised debates and interviews would translate into votes on election day. Serpa and Pardo's weakness, he claimed, was focusing too heavily on the Bogota electorate. Rivera calculated he would need 1.5 million votes to win the primary.

Trying to Not Make Enemies

¶4. (C) Rivera said he was good friends with two his main challengers, Serpa and Pardo, and was determined not to engage in personal attacks or negative campaigning (Note: Pardo and Rivera reportedly had a brief shoving match last week. End Note). He claimed that if Serpa won, it would be disastrous for the PLC, since Colombians had "turned the page on Serpa," who has lost twice already in presidential elections. Rivera believed Pardo had a much better chance against Uribe, but despite his being an excellent politician, he was "about politics," while Rivera was "about issues." Rivera expressed frustration at the lack of issues being discussed, but said it was Colombian tradition to focus more on personalities than platforms. He claimed that Uribe won in 2002 on the sole issue of security, whereas Rivera championed a platform of reducing corruption, universal health care, and mandatory education, in addition to security.

Liberals On the Rise; Number of Parties Declining

¶5. (C) Rivera said the future of the Liberal party was excellent and the PLC would be in extraordinary shape if Serpa lost the primary. He predicted that the PLC would gain the most seats overall in the House and the Senate, but that parties supporting Uribe would have slight control in both houses by forming a tenuous coalition. Rivera said if he did win, he would be inclusive, and work with Uribistas, particularly since many were former PLC members. Rivera foresaw the number of parties in Colombia declining dramatically following elections as a result of new electoral rules dictating that a party must garner 2 percent of votes cast for either House or Senate to maintain its official party status (ref A). He said eight parties would remain from the current 59. According to Rivera, the eight parties were the Liberals, Cambio Radical, Partido Conservador, Partido de la "U," Polo Democratico Alternativo, Colombia Democratico, Colombia Viva, and Convergencia Ciudadana, (Ref B). (Note: Embassy predicts that 8-12 recognized parties will remain following the election).

Colombia's Foreign Policy in the Region

¶6. (C) Rivera criticized Uribe for distancing himself from the region's leaders and said regional cooperation on anti-terrorism and anti-nacotrafficking had suffered as a result. He pointed to Colombia's growing importance in the region, and said that as President, he would ensure Colombia served as a "bridge of confidence" between the United States and countries like Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela. In Rivera's view, Uribe had chosen an adversarial approach with leaders in the region, whom he believed had the potential to assist Colombia in defeating the FARC, a group he styled the "Al-Qaida of the region." On the topic of the FTA with the United States, he said he saw the benefits, but worried that the farmers who lost their jobs would turn to coca cultivation if the government did not develop an alternative plan for crop diversification. He admitted that the PLC had not yet established a party line on the FTA, but if they were to support it, the Government needed to offer more economic support for Colombian farmers.

Comment and Biographical Note

¶7. (C) Rivera, a 14-year Congressional veteran, has no shot at winning the PLC primary. He is popular, however, among younger voters, who view him as articulate and knowledgeable. He might be able to build on that support in 2010 or beyond. Rivera (along with Pardo and Gonzalez) placed himself at personal risk by taking a strongly anti-paramilitary stand in the national debate on the Justice and Peace Law. He is also a leading supporter of the U.S.-Colombian extradition

relationship. A former IVP grantee, Rivera has been open to dealing with us on major issues.

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